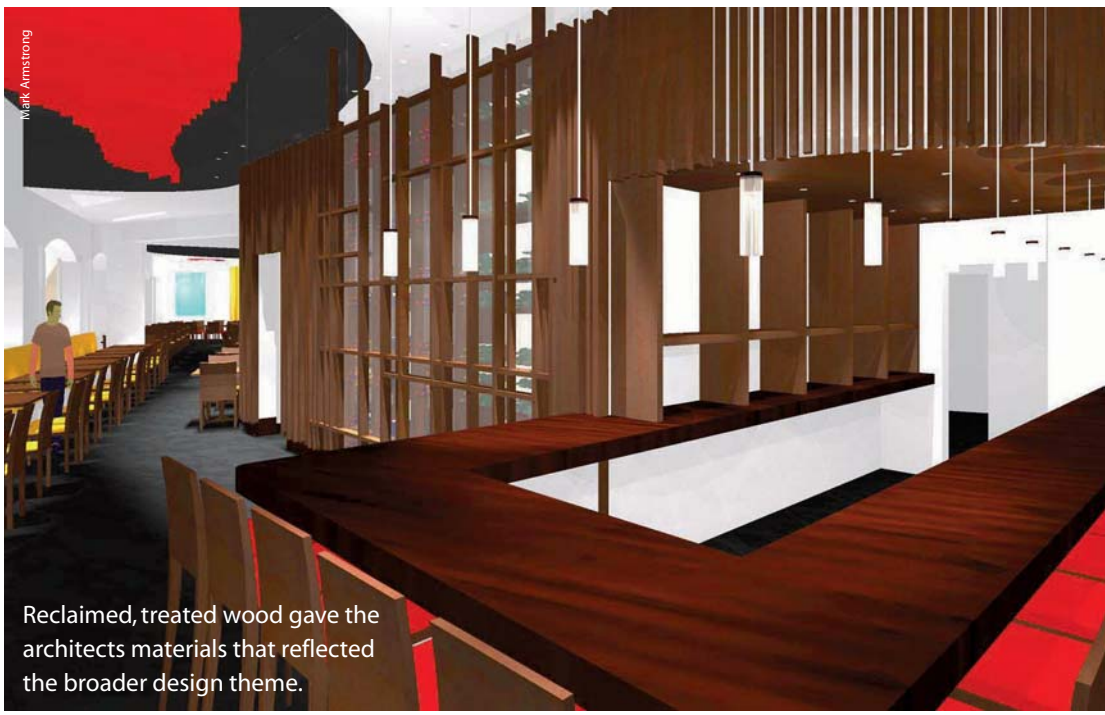
DISTRESS TEST

Recovered Lumber Gets New Life in Las Vegas



Mark Armstrong

Reclaimed, treated wood gave the architects materials that reflected the broader design theme.

Virtue and Vegas may seem incongruous, but at Woo, former Nobu Chef Peter Woo's new restaurant in the Palazzo Casino and Resort, Boston architects Anne E. Snelling-Lee and Mark Armstrong teamed up to demonstrate how hip and green can converge in Sin City.

The pair's collaboration includes using low volatile organic compound (VOC) paints, sealants, adhesives and fabrics; they've called for the plaster used throughout to have integral finish, making it unnecessary to paint the main rooms. All metals—including the bar top, base moldings and trim—were hand-rubbed.

The signature look of the restaurant, however, comes from the application of butternut wood panels and bamboo, environmentally responsible materials the architects said fit their desire to create a rustic environment. The panels are primarily lit from one side, so light spills through the distressed areas creating unique, light splattered patterns.

Long panels of bamboo plywood, produced by Smith & Fong Plyboo of San Francisco, worked as a design element and a functional divider. The bamboo is first boiled in a bath of boric acid and lime solution to extract the starch that attracts termites or powderpost beetles. It is then kiln dried, sanded smooth and laminated edge to edge to create panels.

"We were challenged with the triangular space, and the location of the kitchen is fixed up front where the entry is," said Armstrong. "We had to create a horizontal but theatrically lit element that would gracefully carry people around the kitchen and into the main dining room."

The effect was magnified by the introduction of tiny windows, at irregular intervals, that allow diners a glimpse of action behind the scenes. Snelling-Lee said the design drew from the spaces found both in water wheels in ancient China and old barns in the Midwest, where slats fall down giving passersby a peek into another environment. "When guests are circulating by the wall they'll also get ethereal slats of glowing light," she said. "Sometimes they'll see activity shadows moving from the kitchen, sometimes it will be from the source."

Since the panels can be sanded using conventional woodworking equipment and either glued or mechanically fastened like traditional wood products, the architects had ample freedom when separating the kitchen from the public space.

"Peter Woo comes from a restaurant where he was always on display when making sushi," said Snelling-Lee. "He wanted people to have a sense of the activity but not necessarily focus on him."

Snelling-Lee and Armstrong were also looking for an interesting, semi-transparent material to subdivide space near the windows and organize the tables for private parties. They found the natural warmth and the imperfect character of butternut wood panels encased in glass to be a great solution for keeping with the rustic design intent. It also gave them the ability to create exciting lighting effects.

The panels were developed by Parker Nichols of Vermont Wildwoods, who first began experimenting with the wood in 2001. Nichols collects diseased and killed butternut trees from throughout northern New England and sorts them according to their degree of distress. "Drive By" grade, he said, looks like someone sprayed it with shotgun pellets.

The wood is kiln dried until its moisture content is between 10 percent and 12 percent before being sliced to a width of 0.6 millimeters and put on a conveyor belt, where it's hit with temperature sensitive air blowers. The wood is then sandwiched between two pieces of glass and held together by a resin. Net thickness of the glass panels is 5/16ths of an inch (two sheets of 1/8th inch glass).

"The veneer in the glass comes alive with not only the rich grain of the wood," said Armstrong, "but with the spray of illumination penetrating the holes that resulted in the tree's demise."

— Susan Chaityn Lebovits

Mark Armstrong